

Non Official

by PMOHWinters

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Summary: Under certain circumstances, an agent of the Office of Naval Intelligence may choose to work under Non Official Status. Said agent will operate beyond resource and support from any Section and will also recognize no law or authority other than God Himself.

1. The Start Them Young

"_Who am I? I am one who saves the weak and crushes the strong. One with the strongest of arms to knock foes off their feet. One who carries the strongest of shields. I am an ally of Justice!_"

Letty Whiterock

Chapter 1: They Start Them Young

****Undisclosed Location****

"Do you know the implications of this?"

"Maybe I do."

"You're trying to mandate the creation of an entirely new section! Does the Board even know about this?"

"What they don't know can't hurt them."

"Sir, isn't that considered treason?"

"If that's so, then the entire Board, every section chief, and every ONI employee down to the janitor deserves to be shot."

"Why do we even need a fourth section?"

"_Fifth_ section. It's just called Section Four because somebody had the bright idea to screw up the count and name the Internal Affairs

Division Section Zero."

"You didn't answer the question."

"Because I have found a need for there to be a small elite section that is entirely under my direction, have full oversight over the UNSC as a whole, and perform missions that don't necessarily fall into line with any of the other sections' duties. Besides, have you seen how the other three sections that the Board controls have turned out? The bastards have literally run them straight into the ground. I don't count Section Zero because I run it, but the personnel have little power to do anything except report what their coworkers are doing. Plus, I don't like the idea of Section Three getting a monopoly on covert operations, _especially_ because Section Three is under Board control."

"But still, this seems a little drastic."

"It will all work out in the long run. I've already drafted up the operational manual and a roster for this section. I need you to perform the most important task."

"What will that be?"

"You're going to fill out the roster and do a bit of headhunting."

****Los Angeles County Hospital, Los Angeles****

****Earth, Sol System****

****December 17, 2530****

"Look who's here!" The nurse said giddily as she brought the newborn baby into Lisa Carlton Hubbard's hospital room.

"He's beautiful!" Lisa giggled as she took the baby and held it in her arms.

"He's _ours_." Johnathan Hubbard said as he held the baby's hands.

"What should we name him?"

"Well, I promised my old man I'd name the baby after him. Hell, he even included that fact in his will to make sure I wouldn't forget!"

"Then it's settled." Lisa tickled the baby's nose. "Your name is going to be Ryan from now on."

"Mrs. Hubbard?" A tall man wearing a doctor's coat and thick rimmed glasses entered the room. "A moment of your time?"

"Yes? Who are you?"

"I'm Doctor Willard, from Pediatrics. I'm afraid we've made a bit of a mistake."

"What?" Johnathan got up from his chair and glared at the doctor.

"What kind of mistake?"

"It seems that due to a mixup in the computer tracking system, we've forgotten to put your son through a proper medical screening." Willard said simply, adjusting his glasses. "This will only take a few minutes."

Johnathan and Lisa looked nervously at each other. Lisa then reluctantly handed the sleeping Ryan to Doctor Willard.

"Thank you. I'll be back shortly." Doctor Willard exited the room with the baby in his arms. He then moved several doors down the hall and entered an empty examination room.

"Is that him?" A figure in the darkness asked, staying in the shadows of the dimly lit room.

"Y-yes." Doctor Willard stammered. "This is him."

"Good, just put him on the table then. This won't take long."

Doctor Willard gingerly placed Ryan on the examination table. The baby, somehow noticing something was wrong, began to gurgle and squeal in fear.

"Shhhh." The figure said soothingly as he pressed the chip injector onto Ryan's tiny arm. "This won't hurt a bit."

With a little puff of pressurized air, the nano tracker tag was inserted right beneath the baby's skin. Wherever his journeys took him, the Office of Naval Intelligence would know exactly where he went.

"Okay, we're finished here." The figure said as Willard took the baby back. "I hope I don't have to remind you that under UNSC law, you cannot utter any word or mention of this to anybody outside the room."

"Yes sir!" Doctor Willard nodded his head furiously, and with Ryan in hand, beat a hasty retreat out of the room.

"I don't even know why I even try to understand what the Director wants." The figure sighed and shook his head. He then gathered his things and exited the room, making sure to lock the door behind him.

**San Marino, California
>June 11, 2542

"Hey mister." A young 12 year old boy with messy dirty-blond hair stopped in front of a random pedestrian. "Wanna see a trick?"

"Okay." The man shrugged. "What's the trick?"

"That I can tell you the exact amount of dollars you have in your wallet within a dollar."

"No way."

"Let me ask you a couple of questions." Ryan grinned. "What's your job?"

"Banker."

"How many floors is your house?"

"Two."

"What's your favorite bird?"

"A swallow."

"Okay." Ryan took out a scrap of paper, scribbled something on it, folded it, and handed it to the man. "Don't open that just yet. Can you please count the money in your wallet?"

"Uh huh." The man opened his wallet and sifted through it. "Thirty two dollars."

"Okay, open the piece of paper."

The man opened the paper. "Thirty two dollars. Oh my god, that's amazing!"

"Isn't it?"

"Alright, break it up!" A pair of police officers arrived. "Damnit Ryan, we've told you already that street performing is illegal here!"

"Aw, but-"

"No buts this time." One of the policemen grabbed Ryan by the collar. "You're coming with us."

Meanwhile, a man who was keeping an eye on the entire ordeal pulled up his collar and spoke into the microphone concealed in there.

"Control? I've found him."

****Ten minutes later****

"So what did he do this time?" Johnathan Hubbard sighed as he saw a pair of police officers escorting Ryan to the front door.

"We caught him doing street tricks again." The officer on the left said. "You do know that performing on the streets is against city code."

"All too well." Johnathan shook his head.

"We'll let you off with a warning, but even we have limits to our patients. The San Marino Police Department has better things to do than busting kids for doing tricks on the street."

"I'm sure you do." Johnathan said sarcastically. San Marino had never had a major crime for over four decades. The closest thing was when some thug tried to break into a home and ended up on the wrong end of

a shotgun. Really, all the police in this town did was camp the school parking lots and wait for speeders to pass by.

"Well, we've got to be going then." The police officers turned around and returned to their car.

"Ryan, what am I going to do with you?" Johnathan sighed as he closed the front door. "When I told you to get a job, I didn't mean going out on the street and doing mere parlor tricks."

"They are not parlor tricks." Ryan pouted. "I don't see why you can't believe the fact that I can manipulate what people can think and do--"

"No more of that hocus pocus nonsense." Johnathan picked up a pile of letters and shuffled through them. "I've just received a letter today, and it looks like we're going to have another talk."

"Aw manâ€|" Ryan rolled his eyes.

For sixteen years, Ryan had lived in this small town in the middle of a big city. Unlike the surrounding areas like Pasadena, San Gabriel, and Arcadia, San Marino has had a civic standard not to let large companies or franchises set up shop within city limits to limit crime. This standard was strictly enforced for over six hundred years, and didn't look like it would let up anytime soon. This meant that there was surprisingly little to do in the city unless one was willing and able to travel to one of the neighboring cities. Having an annoying younger sister and brother only compounded the problem. Thus, Ryan often liked to spend as much time outside as possible.

"I just got your school report card, and I am incredibly unsatisfied with your grades for the year." Johnathan said angrily waving around a letter that had the school seal printed on it. "Nothing above a C+. This wouldn't hurt as much if I didn't know that you could do better, and I do, and you can."

"Well, I just don't feel like it."

"That's the problem." Johnathan sighed. "I know you can remember the smallest details about things, solve riddles just skimming over them, and figure out complex math problems without breaking a sweat. Yet none of this talent seems to translate into good grades."

"Uh huhâ€|" Ryan said, clearly not paying attention.

"Well, until you shape up, here's what I'll do." Johnathan grinned. "I'm locking you out of both your personal computer as well as the house network. In addition, you'll spend the rest of summer coming to work with me, so you can see how your old man does his job."

"What!?" Ryan cried. There was nothing more boring than building houses, except for maybe filing the paperwork required to get the permit to build one. "You can't do that!"

"Well, until you can prove to me that you are a responsible young man, I'll have to keep you on a very very short leash." Johnathan placed the stack of letters on a nearby table and made his way to the kitchen. "I'm gonna whip a batch of Power Juice. I expect you to at

least drink a cup of it."

"Bleh." Ryan fought the urge to vomit. His dad's "Power Juice" was nothing more than a diabolical concoction of vegetables, yogurt, and juice all thrown into a blender and made to look as unappetizing as possible.

"What the heck are you doing here?" His younger sister Alice asked as she entered the room.

"Uhhh, I live here?" Ryan shook his head. He looked to see where his brother Edward was, but couldn't find him. Not surprising. He almost never ventured out of his room unless he had to eat or relieve himself. Ryan decided he'd spend the rest of his miserable day holed up in his own room until he bumped into his mother.

"Oh, Ryan!" Lisa smiled. "I didn't know you were home already."

"Dad grounded meâ€¦ again." Ryan grumbled.

"Now now, don't go grumbling like that." Lisa smiled and mussed Ryan's hair. "Your father is just worried about you. Do you really think he wants to make your life miserable?"

"Yes?"

"Of course not! Your father is just worried that you don't take school and work seriously, and that would get you in trouble. He knows you love to play computer games and show off your little mind tricks" Lisa smiled. "I'll talk to your father. Maybe I can get him to soften up a little."

"Thanks, Mom."

****Next Day****

The next day seemed to be like any other normal day, until the doorbell rang.

"Can somebody please get that?" Lisa yelled. "I can't reach the door right now!"

"Ryan, go get the door!" Alice yelled.

"You get the door!" Ryan retorted.

"You're the oldest, you get it!"

"ONE OF YOU JUST GO!"

Not wanting to incur the wrath of an angry mom, Ryan swiftly hurried downstairs and opened the door. He peeked out to see two men dressed in black suits standing outside.

"Excuse me." The man at the front smiled. "Are your parents home?"

****Two Minutes Later****

"So who are you again?" Lisa asked as she sat down on the living room

couch opposite the visitors.

"I'm Collin Brown, a representative of Edgar Academy." He handed Johnathan and Lisa a business card. "It's a government-sponsored school that caters to children of exceptional talent. You could say that I'm kind of a headhunter for talent."

"What exactly does this have to do with us?" Johnathan asked.

"Well, when we look through the records," Brown shuffled through a pile of papers, "Your son Ryan seems to fit our school's acceptance criteria. Apparent skill in memory retention, logical reasoning, and critical thinking, yet poor grades in school. You see, Herbert Academy deals specifically with talented, yet troubled, youths. It's sort of our specialty, you see."

"Oh god, I knew it!" Lisa shrieked. "We were doing something wrong! We weren't raising him right!"

"Relax ma'am." Brown said coolly. "You did nothing wrong. There's no textbook way to deal with a boy like your son."

"Alright." Johnathan sighed. "So how much is this 'school' going to cost us?"

"Actually sir," Brown smiled, "_we_ would be paying _you_."

"Where is this school?" Lisa asked."

"How much money are we talking about?" Johnathan asked at the same time.

****Three Days Later****

Ryan marveled at the large, black SUV that he was being driven around in. The amount of modern electronics, luxuries, and gadgets that was stuffed in inside the vehicle was mind boggling, and reminded Ryan heavily of those tricked out spy vehicles in movies. One thing was sure, the guys who bought this vehicle definitely weren't soccer moms. Ryan was also more than a bit excited to see what this academy was all about. From the information Brown had given him, the school was on the planet Reach. While just around the intergalactic corner from Earth, Reach would definitely be the farthest Ryan had ever traveled from Earth, as well as the first time he would ever be off planet.

"So Ryan." Brown craned his head back from the front seat. "I hear you've got a talent to control people's minds."

"Well, it's not so much mind control as it is figuring out how people think and manipulating them into doing what I want them to." Ryan shrugged. "I pretty much figured out that the average person really doesn't pay attention to what he or other people around him are doing, and I've figured out how to exploit that."

"It's very interesting." Brown smiled. "I've heard that you could make people willingly give you their valuables, no questions asked and pay for things with blank pieces of paper and get away with it."

"Well, kinda. Most people tend to be smart enough to figure out what happens once I take their stuff." Ryan scratched his head. "Got in trouble quite a lot before I figured that out."

"Right, well have uses for a talent like that." Brown smiled. "Just you wait and see."

"So when are leaving?"

"Soon enough." Brown turned his head so he was facing the front again. "We're picking up another candidate who happens to live close by."

"So uh, how many other kids have you picked up?"

"Sorry, can't tell you that. It's school policy."

"That's no fun."

"Story of my life." Brown said jokingly. The car then pulled to a stop and Brown opened the door. "Excuse me for a minute."

"Hey, wait a minute, this is South Pass!" Ryan said indignantly.

"Got a problem with that?" Brown closed the door and made his way to the house they had stopped in front of.

"South Pass" was local slang for South Pasadena, long considered to be San Marino's natural rival city for reasons nobody could seem to remember. Ryan looked out the window to see Brown leading out a girl who seemed to be the same exact age as he was. What caught his eye however was her flame-red hair and eyes. If those weren't artificial, Ryan suspected that her parents may have opted for some pre-birth gene manipulation. Not a very common operation for sure, and not at all a very popular one either. From the way she walked and carried her luggage, Ryan could tell that she definitely wasn't your average dainty little princess. He then realized that he was staring and quickly looked away, slightly embarrassed.

"Ryan, this is Shannon Clark." Brown motioned to the girl. "Shannon, this is Ryan Hubbard."

"Hey there." Shannon gave a sloppy grin and held her hand out.

"Hey." Ryan shook Shannon's hand out of courtesy, and winced when he realized just how powerful her grip was.

"I think you'll like her." Brown said as the vehicle began moving again. "She was suspended twice for beating up fellow students unconscious, expelled from a school for striking a school staff member, and countless infractions for engaging in, starting, and ending fights."

"They were all asking for it." Shannon pouted. "Not my fault they tried to pick a fight with me. I'm the strongest, after all."

Never before had Ryan looked upon a girl with such admiration and fear at the same time.

"This is going to be an interesting year." Brown grinned.

****Edgar Academy, Reach****

****September 20, 2542****

"Welcome, everybody, to Edgar Academy!" Brown said cheerfully to the auditorium of students. There were roughly a hundred hopefuls in the room, though it was pretty much a guarantee that eighty percent of them would wash out and be delegated to "lower class" departments than the one they were being specifically trained to serve in, and that was if some of them didn't leave outright. "I'm glad to see you all here, and I believe it is time to inform you about Edgar Academy's true goals."

The audience suddenly began mumbling anxiously. Something definitely wasn't right here.

"I'm afraid me and my staff weren't entirely truthful to you and your parents. You see, instead of just teaching you, Edgar Academy is a program funded the Office of Naval Intelligence to scout out for new recruits." That was the truth. It wasn't the whole truth, but it was a truth nonetheless. "On the completion of your stay here, you will be expected to accept employment to the Office of Naval Intelligence or an affiliated department. Now that you have been informed, you have the choice of staying or leaving. If you leave, we will think nothing less of you and we will make the proper arrangements. So, are there any takers?"

Brown scanned the room and smiled as nobody stood up or raised their hands. He had specifically scouted out for candidates that were sure to want to stay on the program, or at least find staying a better alternative to going back home.

He couldn't be more right. Ryan really had no reason to go back home, and had no intention to. Besides, he found the prospect of working in one of the most mysterious and feared government agencies this side of the galaxy incredibly tempting. Ryan then looked over at Shannon and noticed an odd glint in her eyes. Ryan suspected that Shannon couldn't be more happy to be able to train for an agency that very likely killed lots of people in very secret ways.

"Well, then, let's not waste any more time." Brown smiled and motioned for the staff lining the aisles to step forward. "We will start off by organizing you all into pairs: a Handler and Operator. Handlers will be managing Operator's actions and missions while Operators actually perform the tasks the Handlers set forth. However, this doesn't mean you'll get vastly different training, since in this line of work, a Handler is expected to be able to fulfill the duties of an Operator and vice versa. We've already gone through the trouble of assigning you partners, so just take a look at the note the staff hands you. Please, and I must stress this, do not let anybody know who your partner is. This does not seem important now, but trust me, it will be."

Ryan took the note and glanced down on it and paled considerably. There, on the note, typed in uniform ink lettering was a single name:

Shannon Meriwhether Clark

"Well this is going to be interesting." Ryan sighed to himself.

2. Finals Week

"_Spies? Spies are pretty much criminals with government paychecks. I mean, think about it, they're kinda like con artists in the fact that it's their job to lie. So basically, the better spy is the one that can lie better than the other guy."_

-Samuel Tart's blog, flagged by ONI

Chapter 2: Finals Week

**Delano, Reach
> **June 8, 2548**

Ryan sat back and relaxed in his rather comfortable vantage point. While some candidates preferred to track targets using all sorts of high tech gadgets and wizardry, Ryan always thought that a pair of sharp eyes and good binoculars could do the job just as well as any image enhancer or remote viewer.

"Uh huh, I think they're still following you." Ryan said absentmindedly through the radio. He was on the fifth floor of an office building keeping an eye on the crowd in the plaza below. Standing in the middle of the plaza pretending to talk on a cell phone was none other than Shannon, her flame red hair standing out like Christmas tree lights. However, instead of looking for the supposed followers, Ryan found himself shifting his gaze on Shannon more than the surrounding crowd.

"You're just staring at me, aren't you." Shannon said humorlessly.

"Oh no, I'm keeping a sharp eye out, I promise." Ryan grinned. "By the way, you've got a very _nice_ butt."

"I swear Ryan, I am going to punch you so hard-"

"Whoa, wait, I think we've got a biter." Ryan swept his gaze to a different part of the crowd. Right now, he and Shannon were participating in Edgar Academy's final project. Every handler/operator pair was being pitted against each other. If they followed directions and were smart, no pair knew who composed the rest of the pairs. The objective for this operation was to find out how many handler/operator pairs one team could accurately identify. Basically, the entire class would be released into a dense urban environment with some resources and left to do whatever they wished. The strategies each individual team used varied. Ryan and Shannon decided to go solo, while others decided to team up to improve their chances. From the looks of it, they had come across one such team.

"Numbers?" Shannon asked, still pretending to talk on her cell phone.

"Uhhh, can't tell at the moment. Duck down and pretend you dropped

something." Ryan looked on as Shannon oh so clumsily dropped her phone and bent down to pick it up, disappearing into the sea of bodies around her.

Now, spies were trained to blend in with their surroundings and not get caught. However, no matter how good they were, the ultimately could never blend in perfectly as a normal person because spies were anything but normal. No, the trick was to be good enough to spot the subtle hints that could give somebody away as a spy. Ryan could already spot three or four panicked heads turning like helicopter blades, trying to regain sight of something they had lost track of.

"Well well well." Ryan grinned. "It looks like Matthews and Tucker have teamed up."

"Surprise surprise." Shannon grumbled. "Can I beat them up?"

"Not yet. We've got to see where they'll lead us." Ryan gazed through the binoculars. "Jean and Yomiko are also here, but we'll worry about them later. Head to the Starbucks to the north and grab a drink or something. Our two targets should try to tail you."

Ryan watched on as Tucker and Matthews followed Shannon to the Starbucks. He noted that they were at least smart enough to sit at a table far enough away from Shannon's to prevent from drawing her attention.

"Right, it's time to shake them. You know the drill."

****Starbucks****

"She's moving." Matthews whispered to Tucker. "Should we follow?"

"Nah, she's just heading for the bathroom." Tucker tapped a few keys on his laptop and pointed at it. "I brought up the schematics of the building. According to this, the windows in the back of the building are barred. I doubt she'd be audacious enough to try and break through them."

"Point." Matthews nodded.

Meanwhile, Shannon casually entered the building, but passed women's bathroom. On the far end of the hall, she could see the window, unbarred and open. She deftly climbed through the window and ended up on the street on the other side of the Starbucks, well out of view of the people tailing her.

"So what are they doing?" Shannon asked through her transmitter.

"Drinking coffee and reading the newspaper." Ryan said absentmindedly.

"You'd think that they would have been cautious enough to consider that the blueprints to the building were altered by us." Shannon sighed.

"Not everybody is as good as we are." Ryan said. "Right, they've just made a call. I'm pretty sure it's to their handlers. You're good to go."

"Finally." Shannon smiled and cracked her knuckles. She circled back around the building so that Matthews and Tucker could spot her again.

"Oh yeah, they found you." Ryan quipped.

"Shut up and let me do my thing." Shannon took a quick glance behind her to confirm that her two tails were still following her. She weaved through the afternoon crowd and made a beeline for a relatively abandoned alleyway between a clothes store and a Chinese restaurant. She quickly rounded the corner.

Shannon frowned when she saw Matthews whip around the corner of the alley entrance with no thought whatsoever to the possibility that his target might have caught on to him and used the alley corner to set up an ambush. Well, that was working to her benefit anyways. A swift kick to the side of his knee sent Matthews off balance. She then grabbed his arm and flipped him over, slamming his back onto the ground. By this time, Tucker was also rounding the corner. Shannon sent a snap kick into his gut, and then sent her elbow right into his spine as he bent over in surprise. Tucker fell like a sack of beans on top of the unconscious Matthews.

"Way too easy." Shannon sighed. "We could have at least taken on some of the more challenging teams."

"Once we eliminate the easy ones." Ryan said coolly. "Just remember to take their stuff before you leave."

"Yeah yeah." Shannon bent down and liberated the unconscious Matthews and Tucker of their worldly possessions. She quickly stuffed their cell phones, transmitters, wallets, and anything else of possible use into a bag and then stuffed their bodies in a nearby dumpster. She took a quick glance inside and noticed that Marion and Chris weren't inside. They had apparently regained consciousness or were found, which was probably a good thing, since there wouldn't be enough room to cram Matthews and Tucker in if they were still inside.

"Got their things." Shannon said cheerfully.

"Good. Leave it at the dead drop and we'll set up the trap again in an hour."

Ryan set down his binoculars and stretched. It had been hours since he had eaten anything. After quick check for any potential threats, he exited the building and entered a nearby deli. He made his order, took a number, and sat in one of the ancient, scratched waiting seats. He glanced to his right and noticed a girl sitting next him. Something about her posture and attitude reminded him of Shannon, but not quite. Plus, she had a completely different hair and eye color, blonde and blue respectively, and she was a bit taller. Still, like Shannon, there was something about this girl that intrigued him.

"Hey there." Ryan said.

"Huh?" The girl turned curiously. "Excuse me, but who are you?"

"Oh, sorry, I'm Ryan." Ryan smiled. "I just couldn't help but notice that you're a Marine officer."

"What the- how'd you know?" The girl said, dumbfounded.

"Pretty simple, really. The clothes your wearing are very clean and look as if they've just been unfolded, which implies you've been in uniform most of the time. Your posture is straight as an arrow, which implies some kind of strict physical training. Plus, you've got the Marine Corps emblem pinned to your collar.

"Oh, right." The girl glanced at the pin, a little embarrassed. "I guess that was kind of obvious."

"I didn't catch your name by the way."

"Oh, it's Karla." The girl smiled. "You're pretty much right on the money. I'm on vacation from Holmes Officer Training Academy."

"Oh hey, I go to Edgar Academy. That's like, right next door to you guys."

"Really? I've always wondered what that place taught." Karla scratched her head. "Those guys there are a pretty secretive lot."

"You know, I find it curious." Ryan cocked his head curiously. "You can't be any older than me, yet you're already making second lieutenant in the Marine Corps. How does that happen?"

"Well, I can only assume that it's because the war is going a little worse than what the propaganda machine is telling us." Karla shrugged. "Recruitment standards, at least at Holmes, have been significantly lowered. Physical training, age limits, and health complications have all received liberal cuts. Hell, they even shortened the normal four year instructional cycle down to just a year and half."

"Huh. Interesting."

"So, what are you learning to be?" Karla asked.

"Well..." Ryan quickly tried to remember what the official ONI cover story for Edgar Academy was. "It's mainly government stuff. Politics and civil service, that kind of stuff."

"Guess we need those as well." Karla said somewhat sarcastically.

"Yeahâ€¦" Ryan paused and began to actually think about his current position. Did he really want to be spending the rest of life doing this, basically living a lie for his entire life? "Hey Karla, do you ever where you question the decisions you made in your life?"

"Uhhh, not really." Karla said.

"Well, I've always had this nagging feeling. What if I chose a different path in my life?" Ryan immediately thought about that time

Brown arrived to his house so many years ago. "What if I decided to say 'no'? Where would I be, and would happen to everything I know around me?"

"Well, I'm not really much of an expert on these things." Karla shrugged. "But, if you've committed your choice, my advice is to just stick with it through to the end and see where it takes you."

"But how do I know it's the right thing for me?"

"You don't." Karla said bluntly. "I doubt anybody does. Besides, I'm sure you're wonderful at what you do."

"You're just saying that."

"Yeah, I am, mainly because the cashier just called my number and I want to get you to stop talking to me." Karla got up from her seat and smiled. "Nice meeting you by the way."

"Yeah, me too." Ryan stayed in his seat and sat there for what seemed like a very long time. It was only after the cashier called his number for the fifth time that he finally got up and took his order. He then realized that he forgot to bring any money. All he had were a few scraps of blank paper. It was time to work a bit of magic.

"Excuse me, how much was it again?" Ryan asked the cashier innocently.

"Twelve dollars."

"Okay!" Ryan made an act to dig through his pockets. "Oh yeah, and do you also happen to know how to get to Spring Street from here?"

"Oh sure, you just go out, take a left, and keep going down a few streets. You can't miss it." The cashier said as he absentmindedly took the blank slips Ryan handed him and stuffed them in the cash register without even a second glance.

"Thanks a lot, sir!" Ryan said. He then took the bag and hurried out. The trick won't last long. It would only be a matter of seconds before the cashier realized that something was wrong and checked the register again. Boy was he going to get a nasty surprise!

****Room 212, Apartment Block B****

"Are you going to be finished anytime soon?" Shannon pouted, not happy with staying still in the apartment.

"Just a second." Ryan said as he carefully dismantled the cell phones and transmitters Shannon had taken from the rival agents they had snagged. "I'm surprised you managed to take down Mikey, I mean, he's like a living Scorpion tank."

"Like I said, I'm the strongest." Shannon grinned. "None of those wusses have anything on me."

"I'm sure they don't." Ryan inserted the cell phone chips he removed into his laptop. "Now let's see if they're smart enough to use dummy

phones rather than their actual ones for contact."

"What are you doing?"

"Oh, just exploiting the wonders of modern technology." Ryan grinned. "I pulled the most recent numbers called from the phones' memory, and now I'm inputting the numbers into this cool little ONI program I found. It basically tracks the location of the phone of the number you input via the GPS network."

"So basically, if their handler ever called them, we can track their exact position at any time no matter where they are."

"Yeah, pretty much."

"Thank god for big brother."

"Uh huh." Ryan glanced at the screen. "They're pretty close by. Think we should go and hit them now?"

"What makes you think they'll stay in the same place?"

"This is where a bit of psy-warfare comes into play." Ryan pulled out another complicated looking contraption and placed it on the table.

"A radio transmitter?" Shannon looked at the object and cocked her head curiously.

"Yeah, with a few minor modifications. It basically just broadcasts static on multiple channels. If our friends are listening in, they'll most likely think that it's some sort of special encryption or cipher we're using and they'll fret all night trying to crack white noise." Ryan grinned. "While we sneak in and find out who they are."

"This is so not going to work." Shannon frowned.

"Oh trust me, it will."

****Edgar Academy, Reach**

> **June 15, 2548**

"I'm impressed." Brown whistled as he looked at the final results of the test. "You two seem to have pulled through this with flying colors. You managed to systematically identify every team while staying off your rivals' lists."

"See, told you it would work." Ryan elbowed Shannon lightly.

"Quit rubbing it in."

"Hey, calm down you two." Brown set his papers down his desk. "I'm mighty impressed with some of the tactics and strategies you used during the exam. Purposely flooding radio channels with static to confuse your rivals was a clever move. Hell, it even fooled some of our own techs. Poor guys stayed up at least two nights trying to decode nothing. And then there was that little op where you convinced the local police that Lee, Roy, and Orson were assaulting Shannon and got them arrested."

"It's pretty easy, as long as you show them what you want them to see." Ryan shrugged.

"Yeah, well, I had to get some of my men to bail the poor guys out before it got out of hand." Brown shook his head. "Anyways, your exceptional performance has qualified the both of you to join a special position."

"What position?" Ryan asked.

"Well, there are four, no, five possible areas of employment for you. There's Section Zero, the internal affairs division. They don't really do much except rat to the Director about what their co-workers are doing. Section One is the public relations division, and all they do is stick flyers on telephone poles. Section Two, propaganda, are basically mushroom farmers. They keep people in the dark and feed them shit. Section Three, black ops, would be more your alley, but" Brown smiled. "There's a fifth, slightly more secret section. Section Four, which directly under the command of the Director himself. Full oversight powers, no ethical or moral rules, and the five freedoms are included benefits."

"Five freedoms?" Ryan asked.

"The freedom to spy, steal, kill, destroy, and assassinate." Brown shrugged. "The trade off is that you'll be going on more dangerous missions than those Section Three guys can ever cook up."

"I'm liking this Section Four already." Shannon grinned. "I say we take the offer."

"Is this the sort of stuff that would get us backstabbed or disappeared?" Ryan asked cautiously.

"Aw, hell no." Brown laughed. "That's Section Three. In Section Four, you work under the sole authority of the Director himself, nobody else."

"How do we know can we trust him?" Ryan frowned.

"You don't." Brown smiled maliciously.

Ryan looked at Shannon and then back at Brown. He was immediately reminded of that little conversation with Karla he had back in that tiny deli. Ryan sighed and made his final decision. There was no going back after this.

"Sure, why not." Ryan shrugged. "I'm in."

"Excellent. I'll take care of the necessary details right away." Brown's eyes glinted. It was fairly ironic that the candidate that was skilled at manipulating people was himself being manipulated to make a choice. From the day he inserted that nano tracker into Ryan's arm to the day he knocked on Ryan's door, the boy's path had already been predetermined by that shadowy individual behind the curtain. Brown had to admit, the Director was certainly a crafty old man.

"We're going to be doing the real thing!" Shannon said excitedly, hugging Ryan. "Aren't you excited?"

"Yeahâ€¦" Ryan said, unable to shake off the feeling that he was being played.

3. Job Experience

"_I don't think you heard me clearly the first time, Sergeant. Once you reach the target zone, you will find that there were no survivors. If complications arise, wellâ€¦ I'm sure that you and your men would be knowledgeable enough to handle the situation."_

_Colonel CLASSIFIED to Sergeant Rutgers of the 105__th__ Helljumpers_

Chapter 3: Job Experience

****Mercan, Erikanus System****

****November 5, 2549****

Ryan tried hard, but he just couldn't make himself feel anything for the doomed city of Julio, or Mercan, the planet it was on. Both the city and the planet would inevitably be glassed by the orbiting Covenant fleet, which at this very minute was beating the snot out of the grossly outmatched UNSC defenses. From the panicked radio chatter he was receiving, Ryan could tell that the fleet was about to pull out, and was already beginning to evacuate the Marines on the ground. Judging from the chatter and the usual time it took for a full size Marine quick response force to pull out, Ryan calculated that he and Sharon had less than an hour to touch down, grab the objective, and get out before they were stranded here. One thing was for sure, the ONI prowler was not going to stick around and wait for them with a Covenant armada in spitting distance of them.

He sighed and glanced out of the open bay of the Pelican he was riding in. He could catch glimpses of the Julio, but in all truth, the city wasn't really all that interesting. It was a dull, backwater jungle city whose sole purpose was to facilitate the rich diamond mines in the area. However, Ryan could tell that most of the diamond revenue went into the corporations' pockets rather than the city infrastructure. Julio was touted as one of the biggest and most modern cities on Mercan, but it was a backwater compared to the even the smallest towns on Earth or Reach. Dull, badly maintained slums and apartment blocks littered with jungle trees and overgrowth composed the vast majority of the city, with the richer and more modern parts consisting of a small district in the center, like a castle keep. Ryan could tell it was the rich sector because that was the only area where the streets were freshly paved, the buildings were alabaster white, and the entire area twinkled like the diamonds it was built on. Elsewhere, the streets were incredibly narrow and the buildings were packed tighter than sardines, which helped fuel the countless fires ravaging the city.

"Well, this is certainly an inviting place." Shannon said as she stared out the back. "Though it looks clear for the moment."

Ryan nodded. From the looks of it, there were no Covenant in the immediate area, which would be incredibly helpful.

"You remember the objective, right?" Ryan asked.

"Of course!" Shannon said confidently.

Ryan was a little more than anxious since this was his first actual field mission. He had petitioned Brown and the Director to let a more experienced team handle a mission like this, but they both laughed and told him that he and Shannon were currently the most experienced operatives in all of Section Four. It certainly wasn't a very encouraging thought. Ryan also remembered his first meeting with the Director of the Office of Naval Intelligence. He was a good humored, but secretive individual. He would not reveal his name or his face to anybody, not even Brown, his trusted lieutenant. The Director also seemed to take a very creepy and paternal interest in him, always interested in what he was doing and thinking.

Yeah, the Director was certainly a very strange man. Ryan sighed and tried to focus on his mission. The Director wasn't big on details, but the gist of the mission was to go in and extract an item of special value. Apparently, a man by the name of Daniel Raines, a supervisor for one of the diamond mines, unwittingly acquired a valuable alien artifact. Besides being a mine supervisor, Raines also happened to be an amateur archeologist, and happened to find an odd crystal. Apparently, he thought it was just another diamond and added it to his personal collection. Ryan and Shannon had orders to retrieve that certain diamond before the Marine pullout. What made it worse was that the Director had given them very strict orders that the diamond not fall into the hands of another faction, whether it be the Covenant or even agents from Section Three. That last bit made Ryan a little nervous, since it implied that he and Shannon would have to compete with rival black ops units.

"We've reached the LZ." The pilot announced. "I'm not keeping this bird sitting on the ground because it'll attract attention. Once you do what you're supposed to do, give me a call and I'll come back and pick you guys up."

The Pelican then slowed down and hovered over Raines' residence. The transport hung there for a few seconds as the pilot scouted out for a suitable landing site. He then moved the Pelican over Raines' lawn and slowly settled down, blowing away loose leaves and grass in its wake.

"Got it." Ryan nodded and leapt off the Pelican, though he botched the landing and stumbled around in his bulky Marine armor. "Ugh, I don't get how those grunts move around in this stuff. I feel like a cheap action figure."

"Get over it, you big baby." Shannon grunted. She readied her rifle and started to climb up the long flight of stairs that led to the patio.

Ryan considered ditching the armor, but knew he couldn't. The Marine armor was part of their disguise, and would serve to support their cover story that they were Marines who had lagged behind during the pullout.

"Let's just get this over with." Ryan followed Shannon up the stairs until they reached the patio. There, they could marvel at what

Raines' residence looked like from the ground. Like many of the surrounding buildings, the house was alabaster white with crimson red tiles lining the roof. On the patio, huge panes of glass afforded a sweeping, panoramic view of the surrounding jungles and cityscape.

"Well, this should be simple." Shannon grinned as she raised the butt of her assault rifle to smash one of the massive widows.

"Whoa, hold on there for a sec." Ryan put a hand on Shannon's rifle. "Let me see something first."

Inspecting the glass with a cautious eye, Ryan could tell that this was no ordinary window. Then, something at the bottom of the window caught his eye and he bent down to get a closer look. It was a small strip of sensor wire running along the bottom of the window and connecting to a small microchip. Ryan nodded when he realized what this was flash glass. Flash glass was a special security measure that really only the rich and privileged could afford. Unlike regular glass, flash glass contained countless nanomachines imbedded in the glass. These nanomachines absorbed the natural light that hit the window and stored it. Meanwhile, the sensor strip would detect any sudden impacts on the glass, like an intruder trying to smash his way in. The sensors would then send a signal to the microchip, which would then order the nanites to release all of the stored light energy at once. The result was a blinding flash of light which would instantly blind any unsuspecting thief.

"Can I smash it yet?" Shannon asked.

"Not unless you want to go blind." Ryan shook his head. "Let's just try the front door."

The front door was a rather ornate wooden thing. However, even though it was made out of rather antiquated materials, Ryan could see that it was built with a reinforced steel frame and very solid deadlocks. The only thing that allowed entry was a single keycard slot.

"I know what you're thinking, and we seriously don't need to do that." Ryan said before Shannon could even open her mouth. "There's always an easy way to do things."

With that, Ryan dug into his pack and brought out a strange looking gadget which looked like a keycard connected to a small box by a tangle of assorted wires. He pressed a button on the box, which made three little lights blink on and off. Ryan then inserted the keycard into the slot once, waited for one light to turn green, and pulled it out. He repeated this process twice more and when all three lights on the box glowed green, the door locks automatically disengaged.

"How'd you do that?" Shannon looked at the device curiously.

"It's a simple door opener. Put the keycard in once to erase the current code, twice to program a new code, and three times to input the new code." Ryan stuffed the device back into his pack. "Easier and less messy than several ounces of C7."

"Boring." Shannon sighed.

"Ladies first." Ryan opened the door and held it open for Shannon like a hotel doorman.

Shannon just shook her head and entered the house, rifle raised.

From the looks of the interior, it seemed as if nobody had been in the house for the past several days. That was perfectly understandable. Many of the rich and privileged citizens of Mercan had the means and resources to flee the planet once word of the Covenant armada arrived. Unfortunately, many of the less privileged citizens were stranded on the planet and had nowhere to go. Thousands of innocent civilians were killed during the fighting as they cowered in their ramshackle houses. Though the place was empty, it was evident that Raines had left in a hurry, since there was still a treasure trove of collected diamonds and mementos sitting in his living room.

"Found it." Shannon rushed up to a large trophy case that contained various diamonds. "It's the top one right there."

Ryan ran up and inspected the diamond Shannon was pointing at. Judging from the file photos, it was definitely the diamond they were looking for.

"Okay, let me just check for any possible security--"

However, before Ryan could finish, Shannon smashed the trophy case open with the butt of her assault rifle and then casually reached in and grabbed the diamond.

"What the hell was that for?" Ryan yelled incredulously.

"It was the easy way." Shannon shrugged.

"I swear--"

Unfortunately, Ryan never got the chance to finish his sentence. At that moment, six black figures materialized out of the darkness, assault rifles drawn and aimed directly at Ryan and Shannon. Six more figures appeared outside on the patio, their forms clearly visible through the large glass windows.

"Drop your weapons!" The lead figure yelled.

"Now now, we're all the same side here." Ryan turned and got a good look at the newcomers. They were clad in heavy Marine armor that was painted black instead of green. From the emblems on their armor and the visible tattoos, Ryan concluded that these guys were Helljumpers. "There's no need to--"

Suddenly, one of the Helljumpers moved forward and violently punched Ryan the face. For a second, the entire room spun and Ryan found himself lying on the floor.

"What do we do? There wasn't supposed to be anybody here!" One of the Helljumpers said in a panic.

"Shut up, Private!" The man who was obviously the lead Helljumper yelled. "You know our orders! We did not find anybody here!"

Ryan turned his head and made eye contact with Shannon. Both of them knew that there was no way they were going to negotiate their way out of this. These men were obviously under orders to eliminate anybody that got in their way.

"Yo! Think fast!" Shannon took the diamond in her hand and lobbed it at the nearest Helljumper. The man dropped his rifle to catch the object, doubtless thinking it was a grenade or some other threat. However, this proved to be his biggest and final mistake. Before anybody could react, Shannon had already closed the distance between herself and the helpless Helljumper. In one smooth motion, she snatched a pen from a nearby table, swung around behind the Helljumper, and stabbed him right in the neck with the pen. The writing instrument pierced the man's carotid artery, which was basically a death sentence. Snuggling into a position behind the doomed Helljumper's body, Shannon grabbed his pistol from its holster and fired several shots, knocking down another Helljumper. The rest of the squad hesitated, unwilling to shoot one of their own men, even if he was going to die in the next ten seconds.

Fortunately for Ryan, these recent events made the Helljumpers forget all about him. He kicked the Helljumper above him right in the knee, forcing him to fall over in pain. Ryan then grabbed his dropped assault rifle and sprayed the Helljumpers, killing one of them in the hail of fire. Meanwhile, the rest of the Helljumpers outside witnessed the events unfolding inside the house, and rather than make a run for the door, they had the bright idea of trying to break through the windows. The instant the rifle butt hit the glass, the entire window pane exploded like a supernova. The six Helljumpers stumbled backwards and screamed in surprise as the intense light blinded them. Not hesitating, Shannon picked up a dropped assault rifle and fired through the windows. Though they were strong enough to withstand a flying baseball or small caliber bullet, only the highest quality glass could ever hope to repel full size 7.62mm rounds. Though the glass didn't shatter, the high caliber rounds passed straight through, finding their marks with deadly accuracy. With just one clip, Shannon managed to down all six Helljumpers outside.

However, the ones still alive inside proved to be a much more imminent threat. There were still three very pissed off Helljumpers to deal with. Shannon kicked a small coffee table right at the Helljumpers. The table slid across the room and struck them in their shins, momentarily spoiling their aim. Doing so gave Shannon and Ryan enough time to snatch up the diamond and take cover behind an oak minibar. They both huddled down as 7.62mm rounds shredded everything around them. The oak minibar was thick enough to hold off the bullets for now, but it wouldn't be long until the wood completely gave away.

"Do we have plan?" Shannon asked over the cacophony of gunfire.

"I was sorta hoping that I could just huddle back here and have you do all the hard work." Ryan noticed an assault rifle round burst through the minibar just inches from his shoulder. "How much ammo do you have?"

"Enough." Shannon slammed in a new clip. "So what's the plan?"

"This." Ryan rose up and fired his assault rifle, but the Helljumpers were battle hardened veterans and didn't flinch from the fire of a single assailant. They stood their ground and returned fire. Fortunately, they were concentrated on Ryan and paid no attention to Shannon. It was easy for her to flank the trio of Helljumpers, using the surrounding furniture to conceal her approach. When he saw Shannon in position behind the Helljumpers, Ryan ceased fire to prevent from accidentally shooting her.

Thinking that Ryan was out of ammo, the Helljumpers continued their attack. Shannon hit the rearmost Helljumper first, covering his mouth and shoving her knife into the arteries in his armpit. She then tossed the body aside and moved on to the next Helljumper, slitting his throat. By this time, the sergeant, the last standing Helljumper, realized that something was wrong and turned around to see Shannon standing over the bodies of his men.

"You bitch!" The sergeant growled and raised his rifle.

Unfortunately for him, Shannon was much faster. She was close enough to give a quick smack to the side of the sergeant's rifle, knocking it out of line for a few seconds, which was more than enough time for Shannon to raise her own rifle and pump the entire magazine into his chestplate. The Helljumper convulsed and collapsed like a rag doll.

"I thought these guys were supposed to be good." Shannon winced as she toed the dead sergeant. "Didn't seem like so much of a challenge."

"Never mind that. Give me the diamond." Ryan took the diamond from Shannon and placed it in a special shielded container. He had been told that the diamond transmitted a unique energy signal that could be detected through SlipSpace. This signal could potentially be used to track the diamond which was why it had to be placed in a shielded container. Unfortunately, Ryan didn't have the chance to during the firefight with the Helljumpers. He hoped that it wasn't too late.

"Well, somebody in Section Three isn't going to be at all happy that his little plot went down the drain." Shannon fired a few shots into some of the down Helljumpers to make sure that they would stay down.

"With any luck, it wouldn't be traced back to us." Ryan turned on his radio. "Eagle One, this Vulture. Mission accomplished and requesting extraction."

"Roger that, Vulture." The Pelican pilot replied. "Coming down right now."

Ryan and Shannon ran outside to their previous landing zone. Already, they could see the Pelican circling around above their heads. Unfortunately, they also saw something they wished they hadn't. A fuel rod literally came out of the blue and struck the Pelican in one of its engine pods. Ryan could hear the pilot and copilot yelling as they tried to bring the aircraft under control when a second fuel rod speared right through the cockpit and out of the rear exit ramp. The

flaming Pelican continued spinning in the air until it smashed into a nearby poolhouse and exploded. It wasn't long until a squadron of Covenant Banshees and dropships headed straight for their position. It was obvious that they had already detected the presence of the diamond, since Ryan heavily doubted that the Covenant would go through all of this trouble to kill just two Marines.

"I think now is a good time to get back inside the house." Ryan gaped at the oncoming Covenant onslaught.

"Good idea."

As they ran back to the relative safety of Raines' house, Ryan keyed his radio from his covert frequency to one of the Marine tactical channels. "Sierra, this is Bosco, requesting immediate extraction. Position is five two six, quadrant delta. Warning, LZ is HOT."

The radio buzzed for a few seconds until somebody replied, "Bosco, Sierra. Air extraction is currently not an option. We're searching for an alternative."

"Sierra, this is Ghost rider. We are not far and can do a ground extraction. We'll be there in two minutes."

"Roger that, Ghost rider. Good luck."

"How long?" Shannon asked.

"Two minutes."

"How long until the Covenant get here?"

"Twenty seconds."

"Wonderful."

Already, the first dropship was touching down on the lawn outside, disgorging a squad of Grunts. Ryan had read up on Grunts. They were basically the cannon fodder of the Covenant armed forces, always sent in first and taken out last, if they were still alive at the end. Since they weren't very tough and not well trained, the biggest threat Grunts posed was depleting ammunition, which was a luxury Ryan and Shannon didn't have.

"Alright." Ryan bent down over the nearest dead Helljumper. "Grab everything useful you can from them. Weapons, ammo, and explosives."

"Got it." Shannon snatched up a handful of grenades and a few satchel charges. "What do we need these for?"

"We can't afford to waste ammo on the Grunts. Our objective is to hold them off, not kill them. If we can rout them and keep them scattered, we can save what we've got for the Elites."

Fortunately, the Grunts held off from attacking until at least three more dropships unloaded their troops. Then, comforted with the thought of greater numbers the Grunts pressed on slowly but surely. However, just they reached the door, Ryan and Shannon pulled the pins on several frag grenades and lobbed them out of the front door. The

explosions ripped through the front ranks of Grunts, killing a half dozen and injuring more. Ryan and Shannon then fired several rifle bursts at the mob. The Grunts panicked and retreated to their landing zone, taking cover behind whatever they could find. They stayed down until another dropship filled with Elites touched down. The Elites yelled what Ryan could only assume were alien obscenities at the Grunts and got them organizing and moving again. With the presence of Elites, it was now less likely for the Grunts to break. Shannon grabbed one of the dropped satchel charges and tossed it out of the door. The satchel slid across the concrete pavement and exploded, sending rock chips and alien body parts flying everywhere. The surviving Covenant responded with a hail of plasma fire.

"Bosco, this is Ghost rider. We're incoming on your position."

"Ghost rider!" Ryan ducked back into cover just as a burst of plasma rifle bolts sped past. "Come around to the rear of the building! We'll be waiting for you there!"

"Roger that."

"Let's go!" Ryan patted Shannon the shoulder to get her attention and pointed to the rear of the house. "Extraction is on its way!"

Shannon nodded and picked up the rest of the satchel charges. She set them all on timer mode and began to periodically drop them on the ground as she followed Ryan out of the back door. Fortunately, the Covenant didn't seem to have the strategic depth to consider putting troops in the backyard of the house.

Suddenly, a Warthog punched through the hedge wall on the far side of the yard. It continued to speed down towards the house, tearing up the well groomed lawn and sending dirt flying everywhere. The vehicle then slid to a halt right in front of Ryan and Shannon. Both ONI agents leapt into the Warthog without a second thought. Ryan settled himself in the passenger seat next to the driver while Shannon jumped into the rear of the Warthog next to the LAAG gunner.

"Alright, go go go!" Ryan yelled.

As if to punctuate his words, the satchel charges inside the house finally exploded, ripping a good chunk of Raines' house apart and sending bits of wood, plaster, and tile raining down on the Marines.

"You don't have to tell me twice." Second Lieutenant Karla Wellings grunted as she gunned the engine.

4. Driving Test

"_General Hughes: Next issue. I want to find out who had the gall and the authority to retask two Marine Shrikes and a Navy Longsword mid-mission to support a single ground unit. I swear I will get to the bottom of this- (phone rings.) Excuse me (__Picks up phone.). Yes, this is General Hughes. Yes sir. No sir. Sir, I-. Yes sir (Hangs up phone.). Well, it seems like the issue has been resolved, and we'll delve into it no further. Let's move on to the next item on the

agendaâ€¦| "_

Excerpt of the Marine Conduct Oversight Committee meeting transcript, dealing with operations in the Mercan Theatre

Chapter 4: Driving Test

"Well," Karla said as she swerved the Warthog back onto the road, "you two are lucky sons of bitches that we happened to be nearby. By the way, I'm Second Lieutenant Wellings and the dork in the back is Sergeant Paccone."

"Don't forget who's aiming the gun here, Kare." Paccone laughed.

"Charmed." Ryan tried to hide the bewildered look of surprise trying to creep in on his face. Was it possible that this Marine was the same girl he had talked in that deli a few short years ago? He took a closer look compared the face he saw to the one back then. Having a high memory retention rate greatly helped in these matters, and he quickly deduced that she was in fact the same person. This was nothing short of a massive coincidence, but he had no time to think about it now. "Glad you could pick us up."

"No problem." Karla glanced at Ryan and narrowed her eyes. "Wait a minute, you look kinda-"

However, before she could finish her sentence, a fuel rod dropped down from the sky and slammed into the pavement just feet in front of the Warthog. Karla swerved around the smoldering crater in the road and accelerated.

"Damnit, Ron, I thought you were supposed to be keeping an eye out for them!" Karla yelled.

"Not like I have eyes on the top of my head!" Paccone retorted as he whipped the LAAG around and poured fire on the oncoming Banshees. The Covenant aircraft responded with a hail of fuel rods, but they all seemed to conveniently land in front of the Warthog or close to the sides, but never near the Warthog itself. Ryan knew it wasn't because the Banshee pilots were THAT unskilled. While part of the reason may have been the wild maneuvers Karla was doing, Ryan suspected that the Banshee pilots were afraid of potentially destroying the diamond. Fuel rods _were_ extremely potent weapons, after all.

"Shit!" Karla cursed as another fuel rod dropped down right in front of the Warthog. This time, she didn't have enough time to avoid it. The Warthog jarred wildly as it drove straight into the newly created blast crater and went airborne for a brief period of time.

"Uhhh, Lieutenant, we have a problem!" Shannon yelled over the roar of the thundering LAAG.

"Better be the good kind!"

"We've got company!"

Ryan turned his head to see four Ghosts whip around the corner on the street behind them, plasma guns blazing wildly. Being naturally faster than the relatively large and clumsy Warthog, the Ghosts began

to close the distance quickly, easily dodging the LAAG and rifle bursts Paccone and Shannon were firing.

"Lose them!" Ryan yelled.

"I'm trying." Karla gunned the Warthog engine, weaving around abandoned cars and other refuse on the streets. She then made a sharp turn into a narrow alley which was barely wide enough to accommodate the huge vehicle. Sparks flew as the Warthog ground against the sides of the alley. However, the one advantage being in such a narrow space was that it negated the Ghosts' numbers and speed advantage. They were dumb enough to try to follow the Warthog in, which made them easy targets for the rapid fire LAAG. The front two Ghosts were shredded to pieces while the last two rammed the wrecked hulks of their destroyed comrades and exploded in a flash a blue fire. "Care to explain why these Covvies are so intent on killing us?"

"What?" Ryan cocked his head in mock curiosity. "What are you talking about?"

"Because Covvies usually don't go through so much trouble to kill a retreating enemy." Karla scowled. "All the time we've been down here, the Covvies were never compelled to chase us whenever we fell back."

"I honestly have no idea." Ryan lied. It wasn't good practice to give away secrets right off the bat, especially to people who really shouldn't know.

"Wonderful." Karla growled.

While things on the ground were quiet for now, the Banshees still circled the sky like vultures, ready to pounce on their prey at the slightest signs of weakness. However, the fact that they were just holding positions in the air rather than attacking was a far more unnerving situation. Meanwhile, Ryan could not shake the feeling that Karla was eyeing him suspiciously. He couldn't blame her though. They were being relentlessly chased by a huge Covenant force, and he was sure Karla was smart enough to realize that he wasn't being entirely truthful to her. Fortunately, she was more concerned with surviving the day than with asking unnecessary questions.

"Persistent sons of bitches." Paccone observed as he caught sight of Covenant dropships passing over them in the air. "Looks like there's going to be some traffic ahead."

Even as he said these words, Covenant troops were already beginning to emerge from every single crack and crevice to block their way. The Warthog swerved wildly left and right as Karla tried to avoid the hail of plasma fire. Paccone and Shannon fired their weapons in an effort to inflict as many casualties as possible.

"The bastards are everywhere!" Karla growled as she tried to keep the Warthog moving.

The next few minutes were some of the most intense Ryan had ever experienced. Plasma and bullets were flying everywhere while everything outside the Warthog was turned into colorful blurs. Suddenly, a massive Hunter appeared from a side street and made a move to block the Warthog. Karla managed to swerve around it, but the

side of the Warthog clipped the massive alien, sending the vehicle spinning out of control. While Karla managed to regain control of the vehicle, Ryan noticed in horror that Shannon had tumbled out of the Warthog. Without a second thought, he found himself leaping out of the moving vehicle towards the spot Shannon had fallen.

"Are you okay?" Ryan asked as he helped Shannon up.

"You idiot!" Shannon struck Ryan on the arm. "Why'd the hell did you come back for me?"

"What, I shouldn't have?"

"Well-" Shannon hesitated, but a burst of plasma reminded her and Ryan that now was a good time to move.

"Hey! You still alive?" Karla's voice crackled through the radio.

"Yeah." Ryan panted as he ducked a volley of plasma bolts. "Where are you?"

"Not far, but we've still got all sorts of hell right behind us. We have to meet up somewhere else!"

"Uhhh, hold on a second." Ryan brought up his map and studied it, even while he was dodging enemy fire. "Meet us at grid one, point two two five."

"Roger that."

"Where are we headed?" Shannon fired a rifle burst, scattering a small knot of pursuing Grunts.

"That way!" Ryan pointed.

The direction he was pointing to was the Julio Mall, a sprawling complex of shopping centers, clothing stores, and food courts. The main advantage this place would give was that it's rather tight and congested interiors would make it difficult for a large Covenant force to maneuver through, as well as provide cover from their air power. Also, another convenient fact was that though narrow, the halls inside the Mall were just wide enough to accommodate a Warthog.

The first obstacle to the mall was the large, flat parking lot surrounding the building. Fortunately, the entire lot was jam packed with cars, probably from panicked crowds trying to loot the mall for whatever they could get their hands on. Regardless, the cars provided invaluable cover against the pursuing Covenant troops. Ryan and Shannon weaved through the cars and made a beeline straight for the mall doors.

"Think we can shoot out the glass?" Shannon huffed as the doors grew larger.

"Doubt it. They're probably shatter proof." Ryan panted.

To confirm his words, several plasma bolts shot past them and struck the glass doors but failed to destroy the glass.

"I got it." Shannon grabbed a frag grenade and lobbed it at the doors. The small explosive landed short of the doors and rolled right under the glass. She and Ryan ducked behind a nearby car as the grenade exploded, shattering the doors into hundreds of pieces. Before the last shard of glass even touched the ground, Ryan and Shannon were already dashing inside.

"We've got to meet them at the other end of the mall." Ryan pointed down the long central aisle.

"Always need to take the long way." Shannon sighed.

They barely passed several storefronts before a Hunter burst through the window of a nearby clothing store, firing its fuel rod cannon wildly. Ryan and Shannon took cover behind a nearby vendor stall as the fuel rods landed all around them.

"Something's wrong." Ryan said as a stray fuel rod melted a pretzel stand.

"What?" Shannon kept an eye on the Hunter but didn't fire. Even she knew it wouldn't do much against the walking tank.

"Hunters always travel in pairs, soâ€¦"

"Where's the second one?" Shannon eyed the rest of the aisle warily.

Without warning, the second Hunter burst from another clothing store directly behind them. Ryan froze in surprise before being pulled to the side by Shannon. She led him up to a nearby escalator.

"Damnit, it just never ends." Shannon growled as more fuel rods shot past her.

The Hunters attempted to follow them, but their huge size and weight proved too much for the escalators to support. They collapsed in on themselves, sending the Hunters plummeting down to the ground below, sending the now arriving Grunts and Elites running for safety. Ryan and Shannon continued running for the other end of the mall on the upper deck. More plasma and fuel rods shot up at them, but from none could hit Ryan or Shannon on the relatively safer high ground.

"It looks like ground floor is no longer an option." Ryan glanced down at the first level to see it swarming with Covenant troops trying to intercept them.

"Nor the roof." Shannon pointed her rifle skyward and fired several bursts. A trio of dead grunts fell from the sky to the ground floor with a sickening _splat_.

"Parking garage." Ryan pointed towards a nearby door and activated his radio. "Change of plans. Second floor parking structure."

Shannon ran forward and kicked the doors leading to the parking structure open. They ran in to see rows of abandoned cars but nothing else. In the distance, they could hear the faint sound of an engine roaring and tires squealing. Ryan turned to the entry ramp and saw

Karla's Warthog barreling through the parking structure. The vehicle made a sharp turn, sideswiping a sedan and ground to a stop in front of Ryan and Shannon.

"Get in!" Karla yelled. The moment Ryan and Shannon jumped into the Warthog, she gunned the engine and the vehicle took off.

"Wait, shouldn't we be going back down?" Ryan asked.

"No can do. We've got a whole load of Covvies right behind us!" Karla accelerated. "I suggest you strap in and hold on."

"Ah shit." Ryan sighed when he realized what was going to happen.

The Warthog rammed straight through the small concrete barrier separating the second floor of the parking structure from open air and the ground below. The Warthog and its occupants were suspended in the air for several brief, fluttering seconds before plummeting back to the ground. The shock of the landing was tremendous, but the Warthog was built tough and miraculously made the landing without suffering serious damage. However, the fact that several Grunts were conveniently placed to cushion the falling vehicle could have helped as well. The moment she regained her senses, Karla stamped her foot down on the accelerator and the Warthog shot away, leaving the Covvies behind confused and broken.

"We gave them the slip that time!" Paccone laughed.

"Jeez, you're pretty good at the wheel." Shannon grinned. "You've done this before?"

"Hell no!" Karla smiled as she swerved the Warthog around another tight corner. "This is my first time! Not even certified to drive one of these damn things!"

Ryan and Shannon both looked at each other. Ryan fought the rising urge to vomit while Shannon merely grinned and shrugged. At that moment, more plasma fire and fuel rods began raining down on them as another flight of Banshees dropped down from the sky.

"Shit!" Karla cursed as she swerved to avoid another fuel rod. "We've got to get these guys off our backs or we're never getting out of here!"

"I think we might need air support!" Paccone cried out. "LAAG's dry!"

It was the sound that nobody wanted to hear. The hollow clicking of an empty weapon that had expended all of its ammunition.

"Fuck this. I'm not planning to die on this damn dirtball." Karla growled as she keyed her radio. "Big Bird, this is Ghost rider. Requesting immediate air support, coordinates 552.53."

"That is a negative, Ghost rider." The radio squealed. "Air assets are currently unavailable at this time."

"You gotta shitting me!" Karla yelled angrily as a plasma bolt shot but just a little too close for comfort.

"Let me try!" Ryan keyed his own radio. "Big Bird, you will provide air support to the provided coordinates. Priority code alpha alpha echo sierra nine two six."

There was a brief pause in the transmission, as if the radio officer were contemplating what to do.

"Ghostrider, request for air support confirmed. Air units have been retasked and are inbound. ETA thirty seconds."

"What the hell?" Karla looked at Ryan suspiciously, but quickly refocused her gaze on the road.

"Ghostrider, this is Little Bird One and Two." The radio squawked. "We're moving into support."

Before the radio transmissions even cut off, the sky above the Warthog was filled with cannon tracers and missile trails. The four Banshees that were pursuing were instantly shredded to pieces under the whither hail of fire. The Marines looked up to see a pair of Marine Shrike gunships soar overhead.

The Shrike was basically the Pelican's leaner, meaner little brother. Shrikes used a scaled down version of the Pelican chassis and propulsion system, giving it excellent speed and maneuverability. Instead of wasting space for cargo and passengers, the Shrike was instead loaded down with missiles and guns effectively making it a very fast and mobile weapons platform that could provide close air support for ground units.

"What a sight for sore eyes." Paccone grinned as he could see the Shrikes circling overhead, raining down mechanized death and destruction

"Ghostrider, this is Little Bird One. Area is clear. Returning to base to rearm and refuel."

With that, both Shrikes wagged their wings in a show of respect and shot off into the distance.

"Looks like clear sailing from here." Paccone commented.

"Uh, maybe not." Shannon pointed as a number of Ghosts and Wraiths began to materialize behind the Warthog.

"Crap. The bastards must have been hiding out until the Shrikes left." Shannon commented.

"Well, it's a good thing Big Bird had the wisdom and foresight to lend us a Navy Longsword." Ryan smirked. "Head for that bridge and keep it moving."

Karla nodded and headed straight for the Johnston Bridge, which spanned the nearby Meele River. In the distance, she could hear the distant roar of Longsword engines.

"Target confirmed." The Longsword pilot's voice buzzed. "Firing weapons."

"Are you sure this is safe?" Shannon said nervously.

"Oh yeah, definitely."

"Waitâ€|" Karla narrowed her eyes. "What _exactly_ is that Longsword targeting?"

"The bridge." Ryan said simply.

"What?!" Karla gaped. "You obviously haven't seen a Longsword strike, have you?"

"Not exactlyâ€|"

"Shit!" Karla cursed and stamped her foot down harder on the accelerator.

Seconds later, four long range Demolisher guided missiles smashed into Johnston Bridge in a ragged sequence, sending pieces of steel truss and asphalt flying in all direction. The long line of Covenant vehicles pursuing the Warthog were blown to pieces along with the bridge, flaming wreckage and body parts adding to the rain of debris.

"Real smart idea!" Karla yelled sarcastically.

"I'm sorry!" Ryan frowned. "I thought it would be a contained blast!"

"There are still _pieces of bridge_ falling on us! Contained blast my ass!" Karla growled.

However, by this time, the fight had completely left the Covenant. With the bridge and most of the pursuing convoy destroyed, the Covenant ground forces were in disarray and in no state to try and continue the chase. Meanwhile, no more Covenant ships appeared in the air. They were all in the clear.

"We're going to have to take a detour!" Ryan said to Karla. "Our extraction isn't at Rally Point Alpha."

"What?"

"Here!" Ryan transmitted the coordinates of their backup extraction point.

"There's nothing there." Karla narrowed her eyes.

"Trust me!"

It was a quite but tense five minutes to the extraction point. Nobody spoke, since there really wasn't any reason to. Ryan could not shake the feeling that Karla was on to him. Actually, give today's events, any person with a brain stem could put things together and realize that something wasn't right. The question was, what would he do about this? Ryan was then jarred back to reality when the Warthog came to a stop.

"Well, we're here." Karla sighed. "Go and do whatever spook business you have to."

"What makes you think we're spooks?" Ryan faked some laughter, but he noticed Shannon tightening her grip on her assault rifle.

"Oh come on, it was pretty painfully obvious that you make a _lousy_ Marine." Karla sighed. "Then again, I always suspected that you weren't cut out for soldiering anyways, Ryan."

"How long did you know?" Ryan gaped, a bit surprised that Karla was able to recognize him, since he had never even mentioned his name once to her during the chase.

"When you managed to grab air support without having to cuss out the air traffic controller." Karla shrugged. "Wasn't too hard to put things together."

"You do realize that you aren't supposed to know about any of this." Ryan sighed.

"Oh, but I don't. As far as I know, I just picked up a pair of deadbeat Marines who lagged behind the evacuation and then dropped them off. I really have no interest in getting caught up in whatever you actually do." Karla motioned to the approaching Pelican. "So long, hope I never see you again."

"Are you sure it's wise to let them go like that?" Shannon said nervously as the Warthog disappeared into the urban sprawl.

Ryan thought for a second. Karla definitely wasn't your average Marine. She was far more intelligent, and seemed to have a bit of an independent streak, not to mention a kind of twisted charisma. If Ryan had to guess, Marines like her were very rare and hard to come by. Besides, keeping her around meant that he could always use her if he needed to.

"Eh, let them go." Ryan shrugged. "They're no threat to us."

"Whatever you say." Shannon sighed.

"I wonder if this is what the rest of our missions are going to be like." Ryan shook his head. "If that's the case, I should've just stayed home."

"I'm sure you'll get used to it." The Director's cheerful voice buzzed through the radio. "I didn't choose you without a very good reason."

"D-director?" Ryan gasped. "You're here?!"

"More or less." The voice said playfully. "If you don't mind, can you please board the Pelican? I'm just _dying_ to see the package you just picked up."

"Roger that." Ryan turned off his radio and turned to Shannon. "Do you ever have that feeling we're totally over our heads?"

"Probably." Shannon grinned. "But that's what makes things interesting."

End
file.